What is waste ?
What does it mean to work on and with waste?

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Creative uses of dirt in *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas

In social sciences, when you talk about waste, there is one book you cannot miss. It is called *Purity and Danger* and was written in 1966 by Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist known for her comparative analyses and systemic views on society. The leading question of the book is of interest to us: how does dirt, which is normally destructive, sometimes become a creative matter (p. 196)? How is waste, cast away, without identity or form, taken up again by people? The question of what Douglas calls the "*creative formlessness*" (p. 199) is not one concerned with art or architecture, nor with design, but with a common fact observed in anthropology: many people, many cultures, all over the world, use defiled matter, such as excrements, filthy rags or even just wasted objects, in purity and sacred rituals. "How come?" asked anthropologists. Some explained this by saying that primitive cultures do not know the difference between sanctity and uncleanness; they talk about "*confusion*" (see for instance, the anthropologist Mircea Eliade mentioned on p.11, who wrote *The Sacred and the Profane* in 1957). But Douglas takes another stand and says that waste, dirt or garbage behold creative powers. I quote and you can read along if you like:

> *The attitude to rejected bits and pieces go through two stages. First they are recognizably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of whatever it was they came from, hair or food or wrappings. This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by*

> *their presence. But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognised as dirt. In the end all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered in the mass of common rubbish. It is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything, for this revives identity. So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous. It does not even create ambiguous perceptions since it clearly belongs in a defined place, a rubbish heap of one kind or another.* Douglas 2002 (1966): 197-198.

So there are two stages here: one with half an identity, a feeling that the matter is out of place and is therefore threatening; and one with no identity, a feeling that it belongs there and is harmless. But, says Douglas, when you poke in the rubbish heap, you revive identity and make waste threatening again. This is because waste has power; it derives its force from the first phase when it was felt as a threat; and it especially derives its force from the fact that we have thrown it away. Taking it up again is a transgression; you re-cross that border with something that doesn't belong here. That is why waste beholds creative powers.

To this, Douglas adds two other explanations that are equally interesting. By using dirt or waste people state a paradox: although we want life to be clean and neat, although we search for purity, for logical categories and non contradictions, experience or life cannot be (entirely) forced into such categories. "*Existence*, says Douglas, *is a chaotic jumble*" (p. 201), it is "*an inherently untidy experience*" (p. 7) and by using waste people show just how conventional their categories are. Take for instance the Lele, a Congolese people, worshipping the pangolin, a scaled ant-eater that is very ambiguous to them. And I quote:

> *By the mystery of that rite they recognise something that of the fortuitous and conventional nature of the categories in whose mould they have their experience. If they consistently shunned ambiguity*

> *they would commit themselves to divisions between ideal and reality; But they confront ambiguity in an extreme and concentrated form.* *Douglas 2002 (1966): 197-198.*

The last explanation for creative waste has to do with alternative patterning. If waste spoils the order and the pattern of our environment, it also provides material for an entirely new and different patterning of our environment. For only a limited set of possible relations was used to make our society, and waste shows that other relational sets might exist, that other societies might be possible, if only they were taken into account. In one word, waste, because it is placeless and has left the stable pattern, offers an indefinite potential for alternative patterning (p. 117).

This theme is well known in anthropology and the idea is the following: when moving out of one pattern or stage of life into another one, while being in transition, placeless, without any identity, because not belonging to either order, people are most dangerous to the establishment. Adolescents are the classic example, but there are also the unemployed people or the illegal people for instance; there are also the independent women, the witches and burned brides and the cosmopolitan Jews. It is not a matter of intention but one of place and of position. And I quote Douglas:

> *It is the existence of an angry person in an interstitial position which is dangerous, and this has nothing to do with the particular intentions of the person.* *Douglas 2002 (1966): 127.*

Let us sum up the three explanations given by Douglas for why waste, dirt or garbage can be used in creative ways. (1) Waste has power because it threatened an order and crossed a border of desirability, it was thrown away. Bringing it back unleashes the power it derived from that first transgression. (2) Using waste underscores the conventional nature of the categories and order we try to impose upon our experiences and lives. Using waste forces us to confront necessarily existing ambiguity, inherently present in life. (3)

Waste offers a possibility of alternative patterning, its placeless character and being without identity or form provides material for creating another type of environment than the one that excluded it in the first place. These are the three reasons why, according to Douglas, waste can be a very creative material.

Waste is "*matter out of place*"

Having understood that, taking our cue from other cultures, what should *we* do? Douglas wants us to move from a view and culture that are "*dirt-rejecting*" to ones that are "*dirt-affirming*" (p. 203). Involving corrupt matter in our rituals, crediting waste in our productions would affirm the physical fullness of reality (p. 148); it would show the unity of life and death (p. 217); it would paint the darker themes of our lives (p. 219); in one word, we would be more complete. This idea of completeness comes from William James, an American early 20th Century philosopher, whom Douglas quotes as saying:

> *Here we have an interesting notion… of there being elements of the universe which may make no rational whole in conjunction with other elements, and which, from the point of view of any system which those elements make up, can only be considered so much irrelevance and accident – so much 'dirt' as it were, and matter out of place.* *William James 1901-1902, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 129 quoted by Douglas 2002 (1966): 202.*

The word has fallen, the definition that Mary Douglas uses throughout her book and that has made her so famous: waste is "*matter out of place*" (p. 44). So, for Douglas, there is order and there is a contravention to that order, which we call waste (p. 44). Our ideas about pollution, about dirt and our daily cleanings have less to do with bacteria, says Douglas, than with our desire for *order*. And I quote:

> *As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is*

> *not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment. (…) We are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea. (…) When we honestly reflect upon our busy scrubbings and cleanings in this light we know that we are not mainly trying to avoid disease. We are separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements about the home that we are intending to create out of the material house.* Douglas 2002 (1966): 2-3, 85.

Waste as matter out of place is an amazing definition. It allows us to emphasise the territorial aspect of waste and to take a general and material view on waste. It allows us to avoid being essentialists for whom waste is foul, full stop, without becoming relativists: waste here is disorder and categorical ambiguity; it is not just *any* thing. But the definition has the perverse effect of implying a stable order and, worse, of implying a universal longing for order that goes well beyond housecleaning and concerns human nature. Douglas admits this in her newest preface. She *does* believe that rational behaviour and human activity require classification; that classifying is a "*human universal*" and even a universal ideal (p. xvii). Without this axiom her edifice collapses. If not for this axiom why would we want to protect the borders of our classifications by cleaning, by throwing away and by casting taboos? Why would waste create discomfort if it were not for our respect of classifications and our longing to preserve order?

I find this problematic. Knowledge that ultimately depicts us as beings craving for order and stability might *work* but it leaves us quite disillusioned and with very few perspectives. Is there not another way? Can we keep thinking of matter out of place, such a fruitful definition, while painting another horizon of who we ultimately are? I think we can and in my case, this leads me to the post-war French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Gestures of segregation in *History of Madness* by Michel Foucault

Let us look at one of his books called *History of Madness* and published in its final form in 1972. More precisely, let us look at what Foucault calls the "*gesture of segregation*" (p. 112). It is not necessary to present the entire book. Suffice to say that the gesture of segregation occurs at the end of the first part of *History of Madness* and that this part has a very geographical character, moving from the exclusion of lepers outside the city walls in the Middle-Ages to that of madmen in the classical period. You also need to know that Foucault has just stated, in the preceding chapter, that in 1657, one out of hundred Parisians was put behind prison walls. He calls this the "*great containment*" (pp. 67-109), and that is where the gesture of segregation comes in…

In order to explain containment, it is easy to say that society casts away those who do not fit into her frame; that society is more or less tolerant and always handles those that are inadequate; that confinement is a spontaneous or at least a logical and functional elimination of the "asocial" people (p. 110). This is a very common view held by sociologists and by people at large. It posits "*social finality*", i.e. a society quite naturally gets rid or handles those that don't fit in (p. 110). But Foucault takes issue and makes a bold claim instead. According to him, there is no such thing as the "asocial type" that society tries to handle but, rather, there is the territorial gesture itself which *creates* the asocial type. The character that we call "asocial" *arises* from that gesture (p. 112). And I quote:

> *That banning gesture is as abrupt as the one which isolated lepers; but for neither of them, their meaning should be derived from the result. The lepers were not driven away in order to stop contamination; around 1657, one percent of the Parisian population was not put away in order to deliver the city from its "asocial" types. The gesture probably had another depth to it: it did not isolate strangers who had*

been ignored so far; it created strangers, changing faces that were familiar to the social landscape in order to turn them into bizarre characters unrecognizable to anyone anymore. It gave rise to the Stranger there where no one had even sensed his coming; it broke the web, it untied familiarities; with this gesture, there is something of man that has been put out or reach, something that backs away indefinitely at our horizon. In one word, one may say that this gesture has created alienation. *(Foucault 2000 (1972): 112. Own translation)*

Original version:

Ce geste qui proscrit, il est aussi abrupt que celui qui a isolé les lépreux; mais pas plus que pour lui, son sens n'est à demander à son résultat. On n'a pas chassé les lépreux pour arrêter la contagion ; on n'a pas interné, vers 1657, la centième partie de la population de Paris pour se délivrer des « asociaux ». Le geste sans doute avait une autre profondeur : il n'isolait pas des étrangers méconnus, et trop longtemps esquivés sous l'habitude ; il en créait, altérant des visages familiers au paysage social, pour en faire des figures bizarres que nul ne reconnaissait plus. Il suscitait l'Etranger là même où on ne l'avait pas pressenti ; il rompait la trame, dénouait des familiarités ; par lui, il y a quelque chose de l'homme qui a été mis hors de portée, et recule indéfiniment à notre horizon. D'un mot, on peut dire que ce geste a été créateur d'aliénation. *(Foucault 2000 (1972): 112)*

One wonders then why this gesture suddenly occurs. Foucault could have opted for historical arbitrariness or simple chance but he took a more structural way. According to him, there is a "*field of alienation*" (p. 113) that took centuries to arise and that arose from minute and multiple changes happening in law, theology, medicine and other. There were also the mental and physical structures left over from the confinement of lepers. And slowly, a field arose that allowed for the gesture to happen, almost calling it in, and for the asocial character to emerge. So, in one word, the refuse process that of

casts away people or things takes its identity only when the territorial gesture is effectively made, when the thing or the new character is disconnected and thrown away, but it involves also a field of alienation that takes a long time to prepare.

Now, what does this mean to us, people working on and with waste? (1) The gesture, the transfer of waste is the creator of waste. Stopping the gesture kills the process. But that is not enough for a field of alienation silently and slowly prepares itself, preceding every gesture of segregation. This means that (2) we have a responsibility in preparing or in not preparing such fields and, for researchers, it means that we either fabricate our knowledge in such a way that it can, even minutely, contribute to a future field of alienation, and sociologists often do, or prevent it from doing so. (3) The existence of the field also means that, in order to suspend the segregation process, you need to undermine the field itself once it has arisen as well as stopping the territorial gesture. (4) Four, and that was my whole point, Foucault's gesture of segregation and field of alienation allow us to get away from Douglas' axioms. We do not yearn for purity or clarity, we do not desire classification, and categories are not a human universal. If we throw away something or if we cast away someone, it is not because we feel discomfort at a categorical ambiguity or at an interstitial position. It is because we have slowly been prepared to suddenly accept and disconnect that which was here for such a long time, that which we were formerly connected to.

I think that taking on Foucault's gesture and his field of alienation *works* just as well as stating that we want order and that we feel uneasy about ambiguity. Take the matter of excrements for instance, how during an entire century, law and the arts had to prepare for excrements to be finally and quite abruptly disposed of during the 17th Century; only then did excrements effectively become matter out of place for the cities (cfr Dominique Laporte,

History of Shit, 1978, translated from French in 2000). Or take the matter of dead corpses that took so long to leave the city center; where all efforts, political efforts as well as theological ones, had to converge if people were to accept this new location of cemeteries outside the city walls (cfr Philippe Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort*, 1977). Or take the illegal immigrants today: how is it that, ten years ago, we accepted them to be taken out of our cities and imprisoned in closed centers; how did the crisis of the '70s and the liberalism of the '80s prepare us for even considering that such a move would be possible? It is not until 1991 when the first move to a closed center was made that we suddenly recognized the illegal immigrant.

To conclude on Foucault, firstly, let's state the following: we are no absolutes or universals craving for order. We are first of all, and ultimately, I think, historical beings and situated beings. Secondly, we turn the definition of matter out of place into one that acknowledges more plainly the gesture of segregation and the preceding field of alienation. Waste then becomes a "refuse process", i.e. the defining and disposing of undesired entities, combining disqualification to the territorial gesture. From order and disorder we've moved to fields, gestures and historical processes.

On refuse, waste and the abject **by François Dagognet**

Let us now move on to a view on waste that is quite different from what we have seen so far, one that was developed by the contemporary French philosopher François Dagognet whose project is to develop what he calls a "*materiology*", analysing and celebrating the qualities of all materials. In this context, in 1997, he has written an essay *On refuse, waste and the abject* in which he wants to rehabilitate waste, reintegrate refuse into our world, give them a substance of their own and thus in a way "*resurrect*" (p. 22, p. 72) them as materials. In this book, he builds "*an ontology of the minimal and the banished*" (p. 13) whom he turns into full blown beings worthy of our attention. But who are these minimal and banished beings?

They are, firstly, the "*abject*", a play on words meaning the reverse of "object". The abject is that which inspires disgust, that which arouses repulsion, and it also means, through its Latin roots, that which has been thrown away, far from oneself. So, the abject implies disgust or repulsion and also separation or removal (p. 9). Abjects can be polluting or contaminating and therefore dangerous beings (p. 11). But Dagognet is more interested in those beings that we abhor for other reasons, because they show our lack of self-restraint, like grease that stain our clothes for example (p. 101); or because they are going bad, corrupting, decomposing and dying (p. 11) and confront us with our own finitude; or because they are ambiguous, like sticky fluids for example that are neither solids nor fluids (p. 112).

Secondly, the minimal and banished creatures are refuse and waste, i.e. beings that have been removed for their insignificance, being so small and insignificant that they have become formless and inert. For example, there is dust (p. 11, 25), ashes (p. 12), rubble, wrecks (p. 22), sand, pebbles (p. 26), … We enter the world of the "*infra-object*" or the "*non-object*" (p. 61) and that world is hierarchical. At its top you find the fragments: the wheel of a child's car, the tyre of a pick-up, a piece of rope, the handle of a pot, a dislocated vegetable grinder, etc (pp. 61-62). These fragments still maintain the link to their former existence or to the whole which they were a part from but have landed in a cemetery. Then comes waste, which are bits and pieces that have lost the connexion with their former lives and to which we cannot relate any longer; we can't play with it, we can't use it, it's waste; apple cores, for instance, or packaging. Then come the scoriae and slag, residues of (metal) production that still contain some value which can nevertheless not be extracted, and are therefore considered with spite, as wasted opportunities. Then finally comes filth and, at the end of the ladder, the excrements.

What do all these things have in common? Which element unites all these wastes and refuses, even crossing over into the abject? One general

criterion was the abhorrence, disgust and repulsion. We have also come across removal and rejection. But these are *subjective* criterions while Dagognet is looking for an element that is independent of our "*prejudices*" (p. 69). He wants to rehabilitate waste and the abject on *solid* grounds, on the basis of what these objects *are* independently of our appreciation of them. He will find this objective and neutral criterion in law, and I quote:

> *In fact, it seems to us that the notion of waste is chiefly a matter of law (which in turn is attached to "goods") and that it requires a transfer: the change of an individual sovereignty on all that belongs to us (ownership) and that we now want to entrust to public authority – a moral person – the only one competent for securing another status for these goods (an energetic one, but better even, recycling). We change hands. As a matter of fact, the community is obliged to take over (collect) those things which we abandon to her. But we ourselves can not throw away wherever we like those things that are not useful to us any longer and that we want to be separated from. There is a tacit contract, an urban and a compelling one which imposes this "dis-appropriation/ re- appropriation", the move from the private sphere to the public sphere in such a way that the wreck-object never loses its ties to the human.* *(Dagognet 1997: 96. Own translation)*
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> Original version:
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> *En vérité, la notion de déchet nous semble relever principalement du droit (qui lui-même s'attache aux « biens ») et obliger à un transfert : le passage d'une souveraineté individuelle sur ce qui nous appartient (propriété) mais que nous confions à la puissance publique – une personne morale – seule compétente pour lui assurer un autre statut (énergétique, mais mieux encore, le recyclage). Nous passons la main; et d'ailleurs, la collectivité se doit de reprendre (le ramassage) ce que nous lui abandonnons. Mais nous-mêmes, nous ne pouvons plus jeter n'importe où ce qui nous sert plus et dont nous tenons à nous séparer. Un contrat tacite, urbain et obligé impose cette « désappropriation –*

> *réappropriation », le déplacement du privé au public, de telle façon que l'objet-épave n'a jamais perdu ses liens avec l'humain.* *(Dagognet 1997 : 96)*

So waste is matter that has changed hands from private ownership to collective management; matter that is abandoned by the individual for the community to take care of. This is the third definition in this talk, quite different from the others. Here also I would like to trace the underlying ultimate. The *contract* is important, the fact that individuals have obligations and rights regarding the community. That is *almost* like an axiom, but it is not Dagognet's ultimate. There is something more important to his work and that is the idea or rather the ideal of harmony, of a harmonious society where compassion (p.70) rules rather than hatred (p. 69). About the abject, the waste and the refuse, Dagognet says that the damned and cursed should be brought back to life (p. 69); that we should have compassion for those who are fragile and abandoned (p. 70); that they can teach us the moral lesson of refusing any form of segregation (p. 28) and of considering a world without excluding anything from it. That is why we need to celebrate the mutilated (p. 28). And I quote:

> *We work at reintegrating those minimised and despised substances, convinced that expulsion of dirt and impurity opens the road to other expulsions, as if a broken world foretold a torn humanity.* *(Dagognet 1997 : 127-128. Own translation)*

Original version:

> *Nous travaillons à leur réintégration [des substances minimisées et méprisées], persuades que l'éviction du sale et de l'impur (ce qui tache) ouvre le chemin à d'autres éliminations, comme si un monde brisé anticipait une humanité déchirée.* *(Dagognet 1997 : 127-128)*

So, ultimately, for Dagognet we are beings that are meant to live in one humanity, in a world of total inclusion. Whatever our mutilations, raggedness or fragilities may be, we should be accepted for what we are in a community of compassion. He is looking for a brotherhood or at least a universal contract. And if you take *that* away, his aims and this book make no sense any longer. That is the ultimate. And I quote at length the conclusion of the book:

> *Materiology reaches the extreme point where it reconciles itself with the abandoned, the nauseating and the poor (particularly refuse, the filthy, the greasy and the rocks). Priest Pierre and Mother Theresa – two charismatic characters of our times – have met the poor in front of garbage heaps and piles of rags. They have succeeded in transforming places of abandonment and waste into a universe of revival, both for the most deprived of our world and for the resources which they have drawn from it. We do not hide our admiration for these pioneers of the human (in a society where misery is expanding and waste is accumulating); we enrol them for their wonderful practice in ontology, which we treated here solely in a theoretical and bookish manner.* *(Dagognet 1997 : 230. Own translation).*
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> Original version:
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> *La matériologie va jusqu'à ce point extrême de se réconcilier avec le plus délaissé, le nauséabond et le pauvre (particulièrement, les détritus, le sale, le gras et le caillou). L'Abbé Pierre et Mère Térésa – deux figures charismatiques de notre temps – ont rencontré les pauvres devant les tas d'ordures ou les monceaux de chiffons. Ils ont réussi à transformer les lieux de l'abandon et des détritus en un univers de la reprise, à la fois pour les plus démunis de notre monde et aussi les ressources qu'ils en ont tirées ; nous ne cachons pas notre admiration pour ces pionniers de l'humain (dans des sociétés où s'étend la misère et où s'accumulent les déchets) ; nous les enrôlons, en raison de leur pratique merveilleuse de l'ontologie, qui n'a été traitée ici que de façon théorique et livresque.* *(Dagognet 1997 : 230)*

Although I cannot possibly follow Dagognet in this, his view, a Christian and a charitable one, discloses some characteristics of waste that might be of interest to us and that I would like to quickly touch upon. Waste *perseveres* in its existence; waste is capable of evolving and becoming more; and this is a characteristic of the matter itself. Secondly, Dagognet touches upon the question of *fragility*: because waste can be fragile and in a way traumatized, it is interesting material to work with and therapists do so, working on a connexion between traumatized people and fragile, more docile environments. Thirdly and lastly, waste and refuse are worthy of our attention because they carry *memories*, because they are the deposits of our existence, because they take us outside ourselves into the materiality that keeps our traces. That is really one of the leitmotivs of the book and makes it, after all, an interesting read. We come now to the last part of this talk.

What is waste in social sciences, what does it allow and imply?

We have seen three definitions, waste as matter out of place, as a process of disqualifying and removal and, finally, as matter that has changed hands from private ownership to collective management. We have seen three ultimates and ideals: a longing for order and purity; a contingent world of multiple actions, connections and responsibilities; a universal contract and a brotherhood of compassion. Three writings, three wastes, three completely different worlds... My point is the following: working on and with waste is not a neutral affair, far from it. Moreover, working with and on waste brings no guarantee whatsoever of the righteousness or the relevance of our projects. It is easy to think the opposite because recycling, recuperation and the like are such positively loaded words. So we need to take extra care of what we do and be demanding for ourselves and our productions. That is why I would like to say now what waste can do to social sciences, what it allows us to do, and what its political implications and its promises are in our field.

Waste does two things to us: it gives us a perspective and it brings circularity to us. Let's take the perspective first. Waste is so powerful that it unleashes reflections on inclusion, exclusion, death and otherness; it is so essential, i.e. so basic and important at the same time, that it work as a *perspective* on social existence and life. And I quote here a definition of the perspective by Alfred Whitehead, an early 20th Century English philosopher:

> *Let us assume that each entity of whatever type, essentially involves its own connection with the universe of other things. This connection can be viewed as being what the universe is for that entity either in the way of accomplishment or in the way of potentiality. It can be termed the perspective of the universe for that entity.* *(Whitehead 1938: 91)*

This definition is very interesting because it involves what it is to *know* something. Knowing involves a sense of importance, setting some features to the foreground and leaving others in a vague and infinite background. So, by taking waste as a research theme, you actually create a sense of importance which draws to it a universe and creates a perspective. It is the universe "*for*" that theme, for the importance waste posits. Another reason for liking this definition is that it underscores the *potentiality* in the resulting universe. The universe for waste is the universe that exists "*either in the way of accomplishment or in the way of potentiality*". This means that every time waste is burned, this concrete fact is reverberated with all the other possibilities that could have been and finally have not been. So when I say that waste works as a perspective in social sciences, that means that waste gives us a sense of importance which shows us a universe that is different from the one we see without it and that is accomplished as well as a potential.

The matter of circularity can lead us to many more technicalities and philosophical as well as scientific considerations. Here, I would like to state two facts: (1) talking about circularity in social sciences unavoidably leads you to *The Capital* by Karl Marx, and especially its first part published in 1867

where circularity, transmutations and commensurability play a fundamental role in determining Marx's theory of value. The substance that circulates throughout all transmutations of commodities and money is, and I quote, "*an identical social substance [i.e.] human labour*" (p. 138). (2) Science and Western philosophy have posited circularity as the ultimate way of understanding and thinking about our environment. It is one of the most important touchstones of our sciences. Nothing is ever lost; everything always becomes something; less can never become more without added value or force; ... We all know these basic principles and as a matter of fact cannot think outside them. Well, what waste does to us is that it pulls social scientists into this circularity in a very clear and explicit way. It is almost impossible to think about waste without circularity. And because circularity here is so explicit, it gives us, especially in urban studies, an amazing opportunity to rethink our cities. What if the entire city, from its first brick to its last drop of water, were thought in cycles of transmuting matter involving people as well as things? That is the incredible question asked by waste, opening up radically new ways of writing social accounts on the city.

You might already have guessed where I am leading to, what the political implications of working on and with waste can be for us, for me. Waste allows me to see and understand how a city, in its material existence, is made by a constant evolving series of small decision making and disqualifications. What streets we have, the river we do not have, the materials we are surrounded with, the façades we are confronted with are all a result of many disqualifications and of as many victories of some material option, of some qualified view, over another. The city's history and its future are paved with losing alternatives.

But there is more, and it is ultimately, for I also have my ultimate (!), what drives me. And it has to do with what I said about Foucault, the segregation gesture, the alienation field, the refuse process, the matter of

lepers and that of illegal immigrants today. As Saskia Sassen commented on seeing my project, taking on people and things into an urban refuse process, allows me to avoid one thing that poisons so much of our work in sociology. And that thing, that poison, is morality. A research on wasted matter as well as on wasted lives holds a promise, that of becoming a harsh critique but without morals. That is the most exciting promise held by waste for social sciences: to give us the possibility of building a critique without morals.

Thank you for your attention.

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